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TAGS: [SENV](#) [EAGR](#) [EAID](#) [KTIA](#) [PREL](#) [UZ](#)
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN CALLS FOR INTERNATIONAL APPROACH TO
ARAL SEA PROBLEMS IN CONFERENCE

REF: A. TASHKENT 190
[1](#)B. TASHKENT 146

Classified By: Poloff Steven Prohaska for reasons 1.4 (b, d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: A broad array of senior representatives from various governments, international organizations, and donor agencies participated in a March 12 conference in Tashkent dedicated to problems associated with the Aral Sea. Several drivers appear to underpin Uzbekistan's decision to host this conference: first, the conference probably is another step in Uzbekistan's effort to win international support for its position on transboundary water usage. Second, it is an effort to secure additional donor funding in light of decreasing international interest in recent years. Third, this may be an attempt to counter growing dissatisfaction in the autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan by showing that the Government of Uzbekistan cares about the social and environmental problems there. While Uzbekistan may have raised the profile of problems associated with the Aral Sea enough to boost international attention, it remains to be seen whether the states of Central Asia are able to work out a sustainable water usage solution. Continually growing population levels and the deterioration of dated water infrastructure are additional challenges the Central Asian states will have to contend with in the years to come. End summary.

Broad Range of Speakers

[1](#)2. (SBU) Nearly 250 representatives drawn from the Government of Uzbekistan, foreign governments, international organizations, and donor agencies participated in the conference "Problems of the Aral: Impact on the Gene Pool of

Population, Flora, Fauna and International Cooperation for Mitigating Consequences" on March 12 in Tashkent. The Government of Uzbekistan (GOU) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) sponsored this conference, though a UNDP official told Emboffs in January that the GOU had virtually instructed them to sponsor the conference. The GOU showed up in force and at a high level, with at least 17 Ministers and Deputy Ministers, including First Deputy Prime Minister Rustam Azimov and Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Karakalpakstan Bakhodir Yangiboev, present.

Presidential Message Resembles August Remarks

13. (SBU) Azimov delivered a speech on behalf of President Karimov that resembled Karimov's remarks during the August summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Bishkek. Karimov called the Aral Sea problem "one of the most complex and relevant problems for the Central Asian countries." Citing the 1992 and 1997 UN conventions on the use of transboundary and international waterways, he called for using these "in a fair and reasonable manner." Karimov also noted that these documents allow states to pursue appropriate measures to prevent harm caused by improper management of transboundary waterways. Furthermore, countries of the region are obligated to collaborate to use and protect international runoff effectively, he said.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization Leader Weighs In

14. (U) Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

Secretary-General Bolat Nurgaliev then gave a speech in which

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he lamented the damage to the environment around the Aral Sea and the plight of hundreds of thousands of people living in the vicinity of the sea. Nurgaliev said that the SCO is committed to environmental protection and the rational use of natural resources, citing an SCO agreement signed in Bishkek last August on further environmental cooperation between the six SCO member countries. He also addressed two other related projects the SCO is involved with and noted that the SCO is finalizing a draft "Concept of Cooperation" that will include agreements on the regulation of transboundary water.

15. (U) Indicating that the conference was intended to raise international awareness of the social and environmental situation around the Aral Sea, Nurgaliev called for a multilateral approach to the problems of the Aral. He said that progress in solving these would only be possible if friendly countries and agencies including the World Health Organization, UNICEF, United Nations Population Fund, the World Bank, and the Asian Development Bank complement the efforts of the Central Asian countries, the SCO, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and EurAsEC. "SCO is an open organization," Nurgaliev proclaimed, and the SCO is ready to deepen regional interaction on these challenges. He also stated that the SCO will consider the results of the conference for future SCO projects because the main objectives of the organization, such as sustainable social and economic development, infrastructure modernization, joint responses to common challenges, and the assurance of security and stability in the region, are linked to the well-being and health of citizens in SCO countries.

CIS Indicates Willingness to Intensify Efforts

16. (U) Sergey Lebedev, Chairman of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Executive Committee, said that the CIS is concerned about the destiny of this vast region and that measures taken so far to improve conditions there have been inadequate. Lebedev stated that the CIS is ready to take part in resolving the series of issues on the agenda,

including developing a unified water resources management system, drafting legislation, and taking steps to improve the environmental situation of the Aral Sea region. Noting that the heads of the Executive Committees of the International Fund to Save the Aral Sea and the CIS signed a memo of partnership in Astana in 2004, he said that the CIS is ready to intensify its efforts in this area.

Other International Organizations, Institutes Address Aral

¶7. (SBU) Various international organizations informed conference attendees of their objectives with respect to the problems the Aral Sea region faces. A representative from the Asian Development Bank stressed the importance of consensus among the countries of the region, and that the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) program could help them to realize their potential. A representative speaking on behalf of the Executive Director of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) said that UNFPA is focusing its attention on improving the quality and accessibility of health care in the Aral Sea region. A Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) official stated that Japan is launching a new project in March aimed at capacity-building in Karakalpakstan. The International Fund to Save the Aral Sea (IFAS) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) presented a joint report stating that improving water use

efficiency should be a top priority.

Uzbekistan Clarifies Position in Parallel Session

¶8. (C) The conference then broke into three parallel sessions that examined water resources management in Central Asia, health, and the improvement of living conditions in the Aral Sea region. Hydroproject Institute Director Sergey Zhigaryov--whose commentary on the Aral Sea in the state-run press has been endorsed by President Karimov--gave a presentation on his view of the problem and proposed solutions. Zhigaryov warned that unilateral hydropower development in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan poses a danger to the region's environment, and that the discharge of large volumes of water in the winter damages land used for agriculture. The shrinkage of the Aral Sea threatens the lives of about 36-40 million people living in the area, he continued.

¶9. (SBU) Zhigaryov then outlined proposals to counter water management problems in Central Asia. He recommended that international water law govern the joint use of transboundary waters, stating that a violation of country interests is a violation of international law. Each country has the right to implement water and power projects, he said, as long as these projects are subject to thorough independent technical, economic, and environmental assessments. The GOU is willing to give its consent to upstream projects if two conditions are met, he continued. First, planned projects should not alter the status quo regime on transboundary waters by reducing runoff volume. Second, these projects should not result in further environmental damage to the region.

Tajik Presents Upstream Position

¶10. (SBU) The Tajik Chairman of the Executive Committee of the International Fund to Save the Aral Sea, Sulton Rakhimov, stated that hydropower is important in the long run. He said that new dams and storage methods of transboundary waters in Central Asia can effectively address water shortages throughout the region, including downstream. These new developments could also boost economic growth and facilitate regional integration. Rakhimov said that the recent difficulties in Central Asia this past winter underscore the need for regional cooperation. He appealed to each Central Asian country's leadership, international organizations, and other countries to save the Aral Sea.

Azimov Presents "Tashkent Declaration"

¶11. (SBU) As the conference drew to a close, First Deputy Prime Minister Azimov referred to a "Tashkent Declaration" that had been circulated to the conference participants. The document warned that the continuing shrinkage of the Pamir and Tuan-Shan glaciers in conjunction with the threat of a reduction of water inflow to the Aral Sea region could increase salinization, further degrade the environment, and deprive millions of people of employment. In a repeat of President Karimov's statement from that morning, the declaration also called for using transboundary waterways "in a fair and reasonable manner," citing the 1992 and 1997 UN conventions.

¶12. (SBU) Azimov then brought up a series of key tasks outlined in the declaration for the international community and the countries of Central Asia, which included: assisting

the Aral Sea region in improving health and the environmental situation; preventing a deliberate decrease in the volume of transboundary river runoff to the Aral Sea; assisting the region in promoting more efficient water usage; combating desertification and salinization of the soil; and creating conditions that will expand employment in the region. In response to applause from the audience, Azimov said he would take this as a sign that the participants approve the resolution. (Comment: Some participants told us they were surprised by this liberty taken by the chair. End comment.) Azimov then welcomed participants' assistance in finalizing a list of Aral Sea-themed projects for donors. (Note: The conference organizers provided a booklet with 100 proposed projects to participants that morning. End note.)

Comment:

¶13. (C) This was the largest Uzbekistan-hosted conference on the Aral Sea in many years, and several possible drivers appear to underpin Tashkent's support of this conference. First, hosting a large-scale international conference that gives more attention to Uzbekistan's point of view on the use of transboundary water than those of its neighbors fits with the country's strategy of attempting to sway international opinion toward its position. Hosting high-ranking speakers from the UN, the SCO, and the CIS while frequently citing international law on transboundary water usage may, in the minds of GOU members, lend the GOU's position further credibility. (A March 11 complaint in the state-run newspaper "Pravda Vostoka" about foreign media criticism of Uzbekistan for passive participation in multilateral approaches suggests that the GOU is trying to respond to this perception). Uzbekistan is trying to show that it is willing to engage with a wide variety of foreign partners to counter this regional problem. The conference probably also reflects a renewed effort to garner donor funding, as international interest has declined in recent years. (Attempts to link the demise of the Aral Sea to global warming, however, came across to several expert participants as something of a stretch.)

¶14. (C) Furthermore, the conference may have been intended to alleviate the concerns of Uzbekistan's autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan, where part of the Aral Sea is located. An Embassy contact told the Ambassador that the real reason this conference was held was to show the GOU's concern for Karakalpakstan in light of indications of growing restlessness, dissatisfaction, and even separatist sentiments in the Republic. Indeed, two articles in Karakalpakstan's leading newspaper "Vesti Karakalpakstana" earlier this month bemoaned the relative unemployment, lack of small businesses, and serious ecological problems in Karakalpakstan.

¶15. (C) Judging from the participation of so many governments and organizations, the GOU may have succeeded in reviving some international interest in the problems of the Aral Sea

region. It remains to be seen whether the Central Asian states have the political will to work together to implement a mutually acceptable and sustainable solution that promotes efficient transboundary water usage. The issue of how to fairly distribute transboundary waters is a problem that could be compounded in the years to come as population levels continue to rise and water-related infrastructure continues to deteriorate.

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